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A STUDY OF THE APOCALYPSE.

By F. G. LEWIS,
Lafayette, Ohio.

A SATISFACTORY study of the Apocalypse will consider at least three things: the author, the place and time of composition, including the circumstances of the period, such as the civil and religious conditions and the literary ideas and customs, and the purpose of the author in the writing.

Such a study may be pursued simply for the information to be derived, or with the aim of securing that which will serve a practical purpose. The second of these is the only worthy method. For the layman as well as for the preacher, the Bible is meant to be a practical book. He who studies it ought to be a teacher of its great moral and spiritual truths, as far as he has opportunity to do so. The facts that he gains from his study are not well used unless he endeavors to transform them into stimuli and practical helps for the benefit of others. The present paper seeks to follow this worthy method. Perhaps it will do so the more truly in view of the fact that it is largely the writer's own experience, through which he has come as a result of attempting to answer the questions which the Apocalypse involves. This will help to explain the personal coloring which is allowed to appear.

I. THE AUTHOR.

The first question concerning the authorship may properly be: Is the book a unity and the work of one writer? The opinion of Dr. Marcus Dods is that "it is difficult to consider with patience theories which propose to allot to different authors various portions of a book than which there is in all literature none more obviously a carefully designed and artistic whole." How well grounded this opinion is appears as soon as the reader opens the book and notices the arrangement. After the amplified title

of three verses there follow the salutation and introduction, covering the remainder of the first chapter. Without this introduction one could scarcely understand the messages to the seven churches given in the second and third chapters. These messages to the churches—Christians in this world—with warnings and exhortations according to their needs, prepare the way for the vision of the future world that awaits them. Chaps. 4 and 5 contain the introduction to this vision, and in the remainder of the book, to 22:5, the vision is unfolded, after which follows the author's conclusion.

To examine the details of this unity would require a paper by itself. I may pass them hastily here, since each reader will easily observe them. In doing this, let him note how the seven seals comprehend *all* of the future, and the opening of the seventh is the beginning of the end of that future, the sounding of the seven trumpets being only a part of the result of breaking the seventh seal, and the emptying of the bowls of wrath only a part of both the seventh trumpet and the seventh seal. The full and final significance of the seals, the trumpets, and the bowls is reached at one point, 22:5. The mystic figures are only parts of the mystic whole, conceived most fully under the symbolism of the seals. That this is not only the natural, but also the necessary, interpretation will be seen as soon as the import of the number "seven" is considered, the idea of completeness and totality, which it has so constantly in the Bible, manifesting itself in the Apocalypse to the fullest extent.

We may now notice that the one writer of the Apocalypse calls himself "John." As to what John he was, it is quite as safe to say that he was the evangelist as to say that he was any other. We might not be able to prove this to the satisfaction of everyone, but the evidence for it is reasonably probable. The early traditions, handed down by Justin Martyr and Eusebius, accept this view, and modern investigation has not succeeded in giving us anything better.

The probability that the writer was John the evangelist is easily brought nearer to an established fact if we notice some of the characteristics of the writer as he himself reveals them. It

is clear that he was both a Jew and a Christian. The abundance of quotation and symbolism from the Old Testament, the call to holiness, and the abounding zeal and hope all show it. From the references to himself in 1:1, 4, 9; 4:2; 5:4; 19:10, and 22:8, we learn that he was a particular servant of God, that he felt it highly appropriate for himself to address those to whom he wrote, that he was enduring exile because of his loyalty to Jesus, that he was a man of deep spiritual experience, and that he had a truly emotional and worshipful nature. All of these characteristics correspond with what we know of John from other sources.

If it be said that these characteristics might have been plagiarized by someone writing in John's name, either in his time or later, it is probably easier to maintain authenticity than plagiarism for his own time; and, as regards a later time, the contents of the book themselves are against it, as will appear in the further study.

II. THE PLACE AND TIME OF COMPOSITION.

As to the place of composition, two points are to be noticed: (1) John tells us that he had the vision while on the island of Patmos; (2) he does not say that he did the writing there. We need not delay over the place of the vision; that may be accepted as it is stated. The place of the writing may have been Patmos, but the indications are against it. In 1:9 John says he "was" in the island called Patmos. It is to be noticed, also, that the tenses of narration are regularly in the past. He may have written it in Ephesus.

When we come to the discussion of the *time* of composition, we enter upon a part of our study which is both more difficult and more important, since upon our conclusion will hinge very largely our interpretation of the significance of the book and the purpose with which it was written. The difficulty of the task is increased by the fact that chronological data in the ordinary sense are very meager in the Apocalypse. Perhaps the only direct historical reference in the book is that where John says he was in the island of Patmos; all others are indirect. If we knew

when John was in the exile of which he speaks, the matter would be easily solved; but we do not. The early traditions are that it was written toward the close of the century, in John's last years, but we do not know on what authority those traditions were accepted, and can hardly be controlled by them. As that testimony is not, in itself, sufficiently strong and direct to prove beyond doubt that John the evangelist was the author, it is even less trustworthy concerning the time of writing; since the time of writing, especially for those of the same general period, is subordinate in importance to the substance of the message and is less likely to be accurately retained. This point is especially worthy of notice concerning an age in which chronology was neglected, at least in comparison with the attention which it receives at the present time.

The indirect testimony of the book itself is, after all, really the best that we have concerning the date of its composition. It is of two kinds. The first of these is offered us under the cover of the title of the book, "Apocalypse." This title connects it with apocalyptic literature in general, of which we must have some knowledge if we are to understand the canonical Apocalypse. And we can understand any of the apocalyptic literature only as we become familiar with the civil and religious conditions and the literary ideas and customs then prevailing. To these, accordingly, let us give some attention.

It was a period of religious persecution. Though the Roman power did not concern itself much about the religion of its subjects, as long as their ideas did not conflict with the empire's authority, still the emperor was nominally head of religion in the empire as well as of civil affairs, and nothing might be placed on an equality with him, still less anything be placed above him. No one might disregard him or deny him the right to be worshiped.

This became a source of trouble for both Jews and Christians. For a time the trouble was only slight; until after the middle of the first century, both were allowed comparative freedom of worship, so long as their worship did not become obtrusive. The very nature of the two claims, however, meant certain

conflict in the end. This would be especially true in the case of Christianity. The Christian believed, not only that he must not worship any other being, but also that he must deny the honor of such worship to any except his own God. Such a claim could not continue unnoticed. It was the more certain to bring on a crisis because it led to ideas of citizenship that were contrary to those of Rome. If Jesus was king, then allegiance was due to him first of all, and if other claims seemed to conflict with his, they would be disregarded. The empire, however, had no appreciation of such an attitude of mind. With the empire, her laws and her demands were first and supreme. Accordingly, an "irrepressible conflict" was sure to come.

The certainty of such conflict was increased by the fact that Christianity was aggressive. The people of other religions in some degree, and the Jews even more, sought proselytes to their faith, but none of them approached the Christians in this zeal. The Christian aspired to bring the world to his thought and to make Jesus king over all. Such a purpose the empire could not willingly tolerate, for it meant her overthrow.

Naturally enough, this conflict of ideas and expectations manifested itself in the literature of the period, and we need to notice the manner of that manifestation, if we are to understand a book which came out of that period and had to do largely with its struggles and hopes. Indeed, we must go considerably back of the apostolic times, if we are to see the full significance of the literature which those times produced. When the Christians preëminently, and the Jews in a less degree, came into conflict with the "Mistress of the World," they were only continuing a struggle which their pious Jewish ancestors in all the ages of the nation had waged against one foreign people or another. From Moses on, their best teachers had exhorted them to a career of holiness and to a warfare against all foreign wickedness. In the days of their national success and prosperity this exclusive righteousness was the abounding thought and the chief motive presented. When sin and transgression became the means of national loss and weakness, the prophet's voice sounded a note of hope and deliverance from such humiliating

conditions. We see this as we read the Old Testament. Prophecy is the voice of warning coupled with the voice of promise and hope.

After the nation had so deteriorated that it lost its separate national existence, the voice of the prophet was not heard with the same freedom as before. If he opposed the nation's conquerors, he was likely to be silenced. If he criticised the vassal kings in narrow authority at Jerusalem, as Jeremiah did, he might expect them to use their little power for his suppression. Such persecution hushed the voices of all except those into whom God had breathed his spirit beyond a doubt. These would speak, no matter who might withstand. In what way should they do it?

This situation led to the use of symbolic expression in an extreme degree, and especially to that form of it called apocalyptic—the unveiling of the future. Ezekiel in his visions among the captives by the river Chebar shows that the tendency had then begun. In Daniel the apocalyptic is fully developed. In the many crude, and in some cases repulsive, Jewish and Christian apocalypses, written during the two or three centuries before and the two or three centuries after the birth of Christ, we have the baser and less useful instances of such literature. The purpose of it, however, was always the same: the writer was striving to cheer the drooping spirits of the people and carry them on to the day of deliverance and restored prosperity.

In the providence of God, who had early breathed into his prophets, not only the idea of holiness and national greatness, but also the expectation of a personal deliverer, both for the nation and for the individuals that composed it, the apocalyptists made frequent use of the messianic idea. They taught the people that, if the times were bad, as they certainly were, that was only a sign of the near approach of the Messiah; God would not always leave them to be oppressed and destroyed by foreign peoples; if they were only faithful for a little more time, deliverance would be granted them by the coming of the great Conqueror whom their God had promised.

It would be a misconstruction of the facts, and an injustice

to the times and the men who thus wrote, if we were to charge them with deception or a lack of pure religious zeal. They had every reason to be as sincere as the Adventists of later times, the purity of whose motives, in the case of many of them at least, would not be questioned. That their expectations were not realized, and most of their writings are practically worthless to us, except as they help to reveal the times and to aid in understanding writings that are more profitable, we may readily admit. But we have to recognize that even the poorest of the apocalypses, perhaps, were used of God to meet the needs of the people of the times, just as some of the poorest and most fanciful of honest and sincere preaching of our own time has been used for the conversion of sinners and the edification of saints.

I have dwelt at some length on the subject of apocalyptic literature, because we cannot understand the canonical Apocalypse without doing so. While the thought and message of the latter is pure and lofty, and much of the others is only gross and repulsive, yet the literary form of both is the same. In each case the writer is dealing with the conditions of his own time. Under foreign oppression the people were becoming hopeless, and he would revive their courage by assuring them that the Messiah was soon to come and overthrow all their oppressors.

In the first century these oppressors were summed up in the Roman empire and its authority. This was the power that God must destroy as a means to the deliverance of his saints. Against this power John wrote. The protest must be veiled, however, if it was to have currency, and, as a result, we have the imagery which he presents.

This study of the title of the book and its significance leads to the conclusion that the Apocalypse was written in the period which the narrative symbolically sets before us. What that period was we may leave undiscussed until we consider the second kind of testimony which the book offers concerning the time of which its narrative will speak.

This second kind of testimony is composed of some brief and explicit statements which the narrative contains. In the

amplified title, covering the first three verses of the book, occur two of these expressions. Here we are told that this is an apocalypse of "the things which must shortly come to pass," and those who read are exhorted to observe the things that are written in the book, "for the time is at hand." Thus at the very beginning John aims to make it entirely clear that he will speak of that which is already impending. Even after these plain statements, he introduces—in 3:3, 11; 11:14; 16:15, and 21:6—phrases that remind the reader of the right point of view. In his conclusion he repeats and enforces this idea, as may be seen from the reading of 22:6, 7, 10, and 12; and the very last words of the one who has given the message to John are, "Yea, I come quickly." In the presence of these plain statements, we are led to conclude, in the words of Weiss, that the book makes disclosures about a future which is "immediately at hand. . . . And thus all explanations of the Apocalypse fall at once to the ground according to which any long development of centuries is to be kept in the eye, whether that be thought of as a historical development of a history of the world, or church, or kingdom."

Finding that both kinds of the testimony which the book itself offers restrict us to John's own times as the period in which we are to discover the historical events of which this narrative speaks, we have still left a considerable number of years in which he might have written; it might have been at least as early as the year 60, or as late as the tenth decade of the century. Perhaps there is nothing in the narrative to limit the time more closely until the second verse of the eleventh chapter. There we learn that "the holy city" was to be given to the nations, but that the catastrophe had not yet occurred. "The holy city," if the term occurred without any context to aid in defining it, could scarcely mean anything else to a Jewish Christian than the city of Jerusalem; in view of the context in which it occurs in the passage just named, any other meaning is probably excluded. Accordingly, at the time when John wrote, Jerusalem had not yet been destroyed by the Roman army; and as that destruction occurred in the year 70, we must infer that

John wrote before that date. As the statement of the passage indicates that the fate of the city was imminent, perhaps John wrote no very long time before that event. Other passages, such as 13:3, 18; 16:17-21, and 17:8-12, allow conjectures as to the exact date of the writing, but they are too figurative and uncertain to assure us of anything more definite than the conclusion above. Perhaps we cannot be more specific than to say that it was in the seventh decade, probably toward its close, that John wrote the book. For practical purposes nothing more than that is necessary.

Only the general setting of the Apocalypse is the purpose of this paper, but it may be of assistance to some at least to have here a brief outline of the interpretation of some of the symbolic representations to which the above discussion leads. This may be done in the words of Harnack, who says: "That the beast (13:1 f.; 17:3 f.) is the Roman empire; that the seven heads are seven emperors; that the woman (17:3-9) is the city of Rome; that the ten horns (13:1; 17:3-12) are imperial governors; all this is now beyond dispute. Also it is settled that a Roman governor will be the Antichrist." Further details the reader will find it profitable to discover for himself.

The consideration of the historical circumstances here noted has been of great help to the writer in the reading and study of the Apocalypse. When read separated from its historical connection, it was only a bewildering maze and largely profitless. Reading it with the assistance of the light that comes from some knowledge of its environment and with the thought that it grew out of the times in which it was written and has to do primarily with those conditions, I find it practical and profitable. I see the Christians of the time oppressed and tortured because of their faith. I see them struggling against heavy odds, as far as earthly appearances are concerned. I observe that Jesus had not only come and taught them that he was the promised Messiah of a spiritual kingdom, but also that he had gone away from his followers, yet with the assurance that he would come again and establish a kingdom in which they were to have a part and for which they were to be ready at any time. I notice

that, whether rightly or wrongly, they had interpreted his words to mean that his return would not be long delayed. The reading of such passages as Matt. 24:34; Mark 13:30; Luke 21:32; Rom. 13:11; 1 Cor. 15:52; 1 Thess. 4:13-18; Heb. 10:25, 37; 1 Peter 1:13; 4:7, 13-17, sets this plainly before me. Then I see John, at one and the same time "the beloved disciple" and one of the "sons of thunder;" I see in him both the filial nature to which the care of Mary could be safely intrusted and one who was sturdy enough to become a successor of Paul in the work at Ephesus; I see him in exile because of his faith and fidelity, persecuted by the power of Rome, but looking earnestly for the day when that power would be overthrown; I see him protesting against the sins of that power, but hampered by the same censorship of expression as others and compelled to veil his language, if it was to have currency; and it seems the most natural thing that God should breathe into him such symbolic visions of Rome's destruction and resulting Christian glory as we find in the Apocalypse.

III. JOHN'S PURPOSE IN WRITING.

Almost of necessity I have already suggested something of what that purpose was. The letters to the seven churches were a message to the Christians of the time—the number seven here, as elsewhere, indicating completeness and showing that the churches named represent all others as well as themselves. The Christians are commanded where that is possible; they are warned concerning their sins; they are exhorted to repent of these, and, with the assistance freely offered from God, to make themselves ready for the coming of Christ at any moment. If they do this, there is a glorious reward waiting for them. If they have struggle and death in this world, they will have life and rest in the world to come.

This message to the churches, which furnishes the contents of the second and third chapters, was only in a remote way a threat against the Roman power, and could be given without symbolic covering. As soon, however, as the vision considers the outcome of the struggle and the overthrow of Rome, only

the use of symbol could perform the double service required—veil the threat against Rome and leave the message an open one to the persecuted Christians, who had become accustomed to reading the messages of their leaders through such presentations. But even when the message becomes symbolic in form, its import does not change, if one reads without preconceptions and with a mind open to see how the judgments that come upon men are sent because they do not turn from their evil ways; it continues to be a message of comfort and encouragement, a beatific picture of the reward which awaits those who are faithful to Jesus Christ.

Accordingly, the purpose of the Apocalypse was to encourage the people and carry them through times of extreme trial and despondency. Other apocalyptists had done this in inferior ways and in lesser degrees. In John, in a preëminent degree and to a purer form, God inspired this consoling and encouraging picture of the joys and glories that were in store for those who should be faithful to their Lord. We do not know, and we have no means of knowing, but it may be that, without some such voice of comfort and cheer, the Christians of the next century or two after John wrote would have given up all hope and Christianity have been well-nigh or altogether effaced. We do know that, by means of the Apocalypse, the Christians were buoyed up for what they had to endure, and we may well conclude that such a mission was the one in the mind of God when he gave the message to John.

That this was the controlling purpose of the writing may be more easily seen if we notice a feature of the book that is too often overlooked. This feature is the repeated call to repentance of sin and separation to righteousness. In no part of the New Testament is the call to repentance and holiness more urgent or more constantly emphasized than in the book before us. Perhaps there is no other part of the New Testament which equals the Apocalypse in these respects. Twelve times, a larger number of times than in any other book of the New Testament, the verb "repent" is used either as a direct call to repentance or to tell of the lack of repentance and the punishment that came in

consequence. And this call is the permeating spirit of the book, as soon as it is read without the expectation that it will reveal more or less of the course of events far beyond its own time.

We can readily see why this note of repentance was emphasized as we find it. If the apostles and early Christians expected that Jesus would return in a short time to set up his kingdom of righteousness and to rule supreme, they seem not to have noticed sufficiently that this return was made conditional. No definite day or year had been given for the return (Mark 13:32). It might be in any one of the watches of the night of time (Luke 12:38). No one was to know how long the Lord would delay his coming. The world must hear the gospel (Matt. 24:14) and the times become ripe for the parousia. In short, the world must be prepared for Christ's return, and God alone knew when that preparation would be completed.

It is in harmony with this manifest teaching of Jesus that John proceeds in the Apocalypse. Jesus is to return in power, but all those who will meet him in peace must have dressed themselves in the white robes of righteousness (3:18) and made themselves ready for their Lord. Consequently, the purpose of the book is to lift up discouraged hearts by means of the glorious joys that are before them, but at the same time to make this glorious hope a plea for holy living. Christ was enthroned in heaven at the right hand of God and promised his faithful ones that they should sit with him on that throne, but the fulfilment of the promise was made conditional on their overcoming the world (3:21). The heavenly multitude which joined in happy praise before the throne of God was composed of those who, in the midst of intense persecution, had remained faithful and pure (7:14). Those who followed the commands of Rome, thus being disloyal to God, should receive the severest punishment that divine justice could give, and should feel its intensity the more because it was given in the presence of the joys they might have had, if they had lived the holy and pure lives which God desired (14:9-12). This contrast between the joys of those who serve God and those who deny his demands is the recurring thought

of the narrative. Accordingly, we may state the idea in its logical order by saying: The purpose of the Apocalypse is to encourage holy living as a means of preparation for the coming of Christ and for entrance into the joys of his kingdom.

If it be said that, acknowledging the truth of what has just been stated, the statement does not include all the truth in the case, since it is manifest enough that John was looking toward the end of the world, which certainly did not appear in those times and has not appeared yet, the reply is that, in case John did expect the end of the world—though it is not certain he did; the expressions which seem to mean that may have been only symbolic to him—this was the *expectation* rather than the *purpose*, and was a human element rather than a divine; and, as far as it was the expectation, it was the mistake also, not only of John, but of others, as the preceding references fully show.

Let me now indicate briefly some practical points which our study of the Apocalypse emphasizes for the student and teacher of the book.

1. It is best to think of the book under the name "Apocalypse" rather than "Revelation." Of course, the two words really mean the same thing; *ἀποκάλυψις* is correctly enough translated "Revelation." In view of the thought which the title "Revelation" has come to suggest, however, it is preferable to avoid it and use instead the English transliteration of the original title, which serves to hold the book in the literary connection which it first had, and aids in preserving the correct historical attitude toward it. I place emphasis on this thought, because the more I study any part of the Bible, the more I am impressed that we cannot interpret it correctly without this historical perspective. The lack of it has been one of the great stumbling-blocks before the progress of Christianity and the world. Vast as is the good secured to the world through the study of the Bible, a good surpassing every other, except the manifestation of Christ, I fear sometimes that some of the greatest evils of the modern world are the result of unwise and unintelligent study of this same book. All the discords between Christians during the days since Christ taught, both between individual Christians and between nations

one or both of which has professed to be fighting in support of Christian faith, may doubtless be traced to this source. A reasonable understanding of the principles and spirit of what Jesus taught would have prevented every whit of these. Of course, correct historical perspective is not the only safeguard against this error in study, but it is a very prominent one, and it is highly important for the study of the Apocalypse.

2. The Apocalypse will be found to be a difficult book to teach. In itself it ought not to be so. It would not be so, except for the ideas that have come to be held concerning it. In order to be a true man and yet teach it, one must have regard to its historical significance and give explanation of it, as far as the portion under consideration may require. In view of the prevailing ideas, such explanation must be made carefully and gradually, or more harm will be accomplished than good. Accordingly, the teacher of the Apocalypse must exercise large patience and discretion.

3. In spite of this difficulty, the Apocalypse, when patiently studied and wisely presented, offers some of the most effective gospel truth we are permitted to use. Although most people very likely have a vague idea that the book reveals, if we could understand it, something of the general course of events leading up to the consummation of the world, and, if they are frankly told that this is not the fact concerning the book or its purpose, the first effect upon them will be something of a shock to their faith; yet it is probably true that, aside from the limited number of Adventists of various kinds, very few of those who pay heed to the Christian teachings give any large place in their thought to the common idea of the book; what belief they have concerning it is hardly a practical part of their Christianity and can be let go with comparative ease. For all such it will be something of a relief to think of the book in the way it is here represented. As they are led to see that the keynote of the book is comfort coupled with a call to holiness, the earnest followers of Christ will discover that here is a new power put into their hands to use for the glory of God. The book will pass from the place of mystery to the place of prophetic appeal—a divine warning to flee from sin and its consequences.

It will be a great gain for the cause of Christ when Christian people understand that a study of the Apocalypse to discover the course of events in the world is so much waste time and effort, but that a study of it as a means of urging men to accept Christ and live holy lives pays rich rewards. To help bring about such a condition of mind is certainly an attractive and wholesale stimulus for every teacher, whether he teaches from the pulpit or elsewhere.

4. The study of the Apocalypse assures us that we know, and are to know beforehand, practically nothing of the events of the world that yet remain. The book which we have been considering has been regarded as the chief of all the writings of the world to make such a revelation, yet all the study which has been devoted to that end has been a waste of time for those who did it and for those who gave it consideration; every calculation has utterly failed. It is not important that we know concerning the end of the world, or even the intervening future. The best longing of the Christian heart is for an experience of godliness and peace. When ungodliness has become so rampant that peace, and even hope, has seemed at an end and there was danger of absolute despondency, God has breathed into some of his servants messages such as that of the Apocalypse, and the people have been carried through to better times. They were in immediate need, and he sent immediate help; but he gave the message in such a form as to make it a stimulus to the holiness he desires, and he always left the time of complete victory a matter reserved for his own counsels (Acts 1:7).

5. Comprehensively, the Apocalypse rightly becomes a storehouse of comfort for those in need, a powerful message with which to exhort men to holiness and peace, and a stimulus to patient, thoughtful, and reverent study of God's dealings with his people and with the world.